

# Philological essays as dramatically controversy in the context of universal heuristic of human motives.

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## **Abstract**

In 1984 Kenneth Burke participated in a panel discussion over the nature of dramatism, insisting that it was literally descriptive of human symbol-using, while some leading Burkeans on the panel insisted that dramatism was metaphorical. This essay revisits that controversy and argues that Burke consistently maintained that dramatism provides a universal heuristic of human motives.

I WAS A graduate student at the University of Iowa in 1985, already known by my peers and professors as “the house Burkean, when *Communication Quarterly* published a discussion from an Eastern Communication Association (ECA) Convention panel involving Kenneth Burke and “several of the leading dramatists in our discipline (Chesebro 17). The subject was the nature of dramatism and, oddly enough, the discussion ended with Burke disagreeing with those “leading dramatists. He claimed that dramatism is literal, while his interlocutors—especially Bernard Brock and Herb Simons—claimed that dramatism is metaphorical. A few years ago, Bryan Crable published an essay defending Burke’s position in *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, but I believe he sacrificed too much in that defense. Given the centrality of dramatism to Burke’s theory of human symbol-using, I would like to offer one more attempt to explain what Burke means when he claims dramatism is literal and to defend that claim.

## **Imagining a Land of No Motives**

Instead of parsing the claims of each side at the outset, let me take a more circuitous route that I believe will bring us closer to the heart of the question before returning to the dispute. Let me start with an elaborate hypothetical.

Imagine the most politically correct society possible: no one draws distinctions between male and female, between those with black, brown, white, red, or yellow skin; between young and old, between the intelligent and dim-witted, between the strong and the weak, between rich and poor, between the first-born and the last-born, between the priest, the doctor, and the fisherman; between holy and unholy persons, and so on. Further, imagine this society did not even have different names for individuals, lest such monikers lead to some hierarchy based on different meanings or connotations. In fact, at the most extreme, this society does not distinguish between “you and “me. Finally, imagine that people in the society not only did not draw such distinctions, but could not—that they could not perceive such distinctions. In such a situation, the question “Who? would carry no meaning.

Imagine further that this odd society drew no distinctions between place and time: that they had no words for “here and “there or “then and “now; that “the place we eat was no different from “the place we relieve ourselves; “dinner time and “bed time were indistinguishable. Imagine that they did not distinguish between mountains and valleys, lakes and deserts, spring and winter, yesterday and tomorrow, hunting ground and burial ground, and so on. That is, they could not answer the questions “When? or “Where?

Imagine further that they did not distinguish one act from another: killing, eating, having sex, giving birth, thinking, running—there was no way to answer the question, “What is being done?

Without knowing what someone is doing, they certainly could not answer how or why something was being done. They could have no technology, for technology is concerned with means and ends, of adapting spears for hunting, pots for cooking, wells for collecting water, and so forth. Purposeful human action is difficult to conceive here. Religious belief based upon some divine purpose would be impossible.

Of course this is a ridiculous hypothetical. No recognizably human society ever existed that was not able to draw the distinctions we draw in answering the questions Who, What, When, Where, How, and Why. In other words, these questions and the answers they call for are *universal* in human societies. Procreation and child care, at a minimum, require distinc-

tions in agents that allow us to know who gives birth and who cannot care for him- or herself. Success that makes survival likely requires a great deal more: the ability to see the overlaps between acts, agents, scenes, agencies, and purposes: Connecting the seasons to the planting of crops; connecting places to purposes of security and shelter; connecting means and ends sufficiently to create weapons that give humans advantages over more powerful predators and prey; identifying people good at doing particular things, such as hunting, fishing, cooking, caring for the sick, and so forth. Answering “Who *in light of* What, “Where *in light of* What, “How *in light of* Why, and so forth is critical for the success of human societies, and is universal as well.

Of course, advanced human societies take the distinctions represented by the pentadic questions to extremes. As Maslow demonstrated, human “needs come at different levels. If we’ve satisfied physiological and safety needs, then we look for love and ways to belong, and later to all manner of establishing our esteem in our own eyes and those of our peers, and perhaps then we can self-actualize. And the Who, What, When, Where, How, and Why questions crop up at each stage, establishing our place, our home, our roles; distinguishing us as “higher or “lower than others in myriad ways; and, at the ultimate stage, realizing our potential as unique agents in unique times and places, working towards our own unique purposes, in ways that are uniquely our own.

Our symbolic trek up Maslow’s pyramid is not necessarily “progress, despite the pyramid’s implicit indication of where the “pinnacle of human existence lays. The “grammar of motives allows us to make important distinctions between, say, good hunters and bad hunters, but also leads to distinctions involving tribal identities, castes, organizational charts, “cool groups and “lame groups, and every manner of sexist, racist, sexual orientationalist, ethnocentrist, and other division imaginable, far past what is necessary or useful and, indeed, to the point of being detrimental to society. As Burke would say, we take our symbol-using to the end of the line, ignoring what’s good for us. Today, distinctions based on answers to Who, What, When, Where, How, and Why are sophisticated to a fault; but they still follow the fundamental grammar of motives that marks us as human.

Critical for the essential, but problematic development of our human sophistication in discerning answers to the pentadic questions is our facility with language. Not only do we *see* a person as a better hunter, a more attractive person, or an interloper; a scene as dangerous, agriculturally fertile, or “late; a means as effective or efficient; and so forth, we can *verbalize* our

distinctions, compare them with others, take up the characterizations of our interlocutors or criticize them, draw from witnesses to actions we did not see, and so forth. Burke uses the term *symbolic action* to account for our actions in verbally carving up the world in these ways. Such verbal carving creates a new, *human* world, as there inevitably emerges a distinction between the *world* and *words about the world*.

The most obvious way that action enters our world is through our interactions with other humans, as Burke notes in drawing a distinction between how we treat objects and how we treat people:

[A] physical scientist's relation to the materials involved in the study of motion differs in quality from his relation to his colleagues. He would never think of "petitioning the objects of his experiment or "arguing with them, as he would with persons whom he asks to collaborate with him or to judge the results of his experiment. Implicit in these two relations is the distinction between the sheer motion of things and the actions of persons. ("Dramatism 11)

Philosophically, it does not matter if we have free will or not. In a pragmatic sense, Burke notes, we treat other human beings *as if* they were acting rather than merely moving (*Language* 53). In short, we enact the pentad in the world, giving it a materiality.

On the other hand, action has often been seen in things scientists think of only in terms of motion. Ancient people attributed motives to the elements, to the gods, and to animals, anthropomorphizing them in attributing purposes (including sometimes the susceptibility of appeasement or admonishment). Thus, Herodotus tells us that Xerxes, angered when a storm at sea destroyed a bridge he constructed across the Hellespont, had his men give the Hellespont 300 lashes and to cast a pair of fetters into it to "bind the sea. Humans also anthropomorphize unseen gods. Judeo-Christian texts make God into a jealous deity who judges and punishes us or a father who loves us. We extend this application of "action as a terministic screen to animals. Thus, like other pet owners, I recognize when my dog wants to play, attributing purpose to him. Action, then, as a framework of understanding the world, tells us to look for motive. It opens the possibility of persuasion, of judgment, of subjection to the will of others, of forgiveness, of choice.

Just how a given community attributes motives will differ in light of their culture, history, and rhetorical needs. As I have argued elsewhere, relationships among pentadic terms have *general* dimensions that Burke's *Grammar* explores at length: "The scene 'contains' the act; means

(agencies) are adapted to ends (purposes); agents are the ‘authors’ of their actions; and so forth (Rountree). On the other hand, there are nonuniversal, historically unique *specific* dimensions in these pentadic relationships. As I noted:

Specific dimensions of terministic relations are normative, established by a discourse community's shared beliefs about “what goes with what at a given point in time, underlying expectations that one will or should find certain types of agents engaging in certain types of actions, using certain agencies, within certain scenes, for certain purposes, evincing certain attitudes. (Rountree)

For example, a “good wife in a conservative Islamic society is associated with very different acts, scenes, agencies, purposes, and attitudes than a “good wife among Baptists in Alabama. A “good Baptist wife in Alabama may drive a car, walk through a mall unescorted, seek higher education, wear short pants, and question her husband; these actions would not be expected or tolerated in a “good Muslim wife living in Taliban-controlled parts of Pakistan. Nevertheless, the general idea that particular agents will be expected to engage in particular actions in particular scenes using particular agencies for particular purposes with particular attitudes still holds. The grammar of motives is universal in describing those general, formal relationships, but not the particular content they will carry.

If we accept as a social and historical fact that humans have made, and continue to make, distinctions that allow them to answer Who, What, When, Where, How, and Why; and, indeed, that this perspective plays a central role in allowing us to become what is recognizably human (for better or worse), then we’re on the road to accepting the universality of the grammar of motives. And, insofar as dramatism is rooted in the assumption that such understandings of action are an inextricable part of human interaction, then dramatism is *literally descriptive* of our world.

Perhaps I’m using a sledgehammer where only a gentle tap is needed. I seriously doubt that anyone would deny that, as a matter of fact, humans do treat and talk about one another as if they were engaged in action (including themselves), discerning purposes behind actions, using time and place as a context to understand action, drawing upon knowledge of agents to figure out what they are doing and why, carving up the world in their own unique ways. But detractors from the claim that dramatism is literal still may have two objections:

- That my description of dramatism is wrong and that Burke meant something different that they cannot accept as literal.

- That my understanding of literality is flawed; that making a literal statement requires something more robust, more grounded in “reality that I’m offering here.

### **What Burke Meant**

Some scholars may point to the “drama in “dramatism, note Burke’s roots as a literary and theatrical critic, and suggest that he’s brought the stage metaphor to an understanding of human action. Parke Burgess, who participated in the ECA panel discussion with Burke, seems to be caught in this theatrical sense of dramatism when he tries to support Burke’s position on the literal nature of dramatism, claiming: “It [dramatism] is not mere metaphor; Burke means that people act on the stage of life” (Burke et al., 25). This “support” prompts Burke to caution: “In this context, it is extremely important to realize how we name things” (25).

Burke originally employed theatrical metaphors to veer scholars away from behaviorist reductions of action to motion (i.e., to highlight that an act is occurring). But these very metaphors have served to direct attention away from the “more-than-motion connotations of “act” and towards the theatrical connotations of “act.” This terministic obstacle has been further perpetuated through Goffman’s work, which straightforwardly utilizes the theatrical sense of “act, stressing how people strategically present themselves in everyday life. But, unlike Goffman’s use of drama as strategic presentation, in Burke there is no “backstage where motives are free from the constraints of the “grammar of motives. For Burke there is no escaping scene, agent, agency, purpose, or act; whatever is being done, the grammar is implicated both in interpreting motives and in “say[ing] what people are doing and why they are doing it (*Grammar* xv).

Beyond the use of drama as a theoretical term, there are other reasons why good Burkeans might be mystified by Burke’s insistence that dramatism is literal. This, I believe, rests on the role Burke has played in rhetorical studies as a de-masker of theoretical pretensions and a revealer of rhetorical subterfuge. Burke came along when neo-Aristotelians held sway in the speech field and we had a rather cramped view of what constituted rhetoric. Then came the 1960s, a political and social context where young graduate students (and some professors) began to question all forms of old thinking. Burke, who had been introduced to the speech field in the 1950s, didn’t become a major force in our field until the scholars of the 1960s finished their degrees and started publishing in the late 1960s and early 1970s.



Burke was a breath of fresh air to these scholars: He warned us about terministic screens and about the misleading models of the behaviorists; he taught us about unconscious forms of persuasion and reinterpreted Machiavelli, Bentham, Marx, and others as rhetorical thinkers; he revealed the rhetoric of religion, of capitalism, and of science; and so forth. How could the one who helped show us the light turn around and insist that his own view wasn't merely perspectival, but ontological and literal?

That is how I read the late Bernie Brock's reaction to Burke's claims at the ECA panel. In an essay following up on the ECA discussion published in *Communication Quarterly*, Brock claims that Burke had shifted his view of dramatism in recent years, trying to establish it as a "philosophy (99). Brock seems to long for the days, as he constructs them, when Burke was more focused on "paradox and metaphor and more interested in the ambiguities of language than in literal statements.

But Brock is longing for a Burke that never was. Although Burke was among the deftest of critics, who used "everything there is to use in his criticism, his theorizing about human symbol using typically aims for ultimate generalizations, from his account of the variations of formal appeals in *Counterstatement* to his "Definition of Man in *Language as Symbolic Action*. And so it is with dramatism. Those liberated rhetorical scholars of the '60s perhaps skipped too quickly over statements in the *Grammar* like the following:

It is not our purpose to import dialectical and metaphysical concerns into a subject that might otherwise be free of them. On the contrary, we hope to make clear the ways in which dialectical and metaphysical issues *necessarily* figure in the subject of motivation. Our speculations, as we interpret them, should show that the subject of motivation is a philosophic one, not ultimately to be resolved in terms of empirical science (xxiii).

Burke claims that the *Grammar* "offers a system of placement, and should enable us, by the systematic manipulations of the terms, to 'generate,' or 'anticipate' the various classes of motivational theory (xxiii). Note that he does not qualify this statement by saying that this system will generate or anticipate *some* classes of motivational theory; he means to cover the entire gamut of possibilities. Because dramatism is universal, Burke is able to use the pentad to construct a framework to cover all possible motivational theories. Burke scholars should ponder this fact a bit more to understand the breadth and significance of dramatism, which, Burke once told me, he thought we had underappreciated and underutilized.

Furthermore, it was not in the 1985 exchange that Burke first claimed that dramatism is literal. Burke's 1968 essay defining dramatism for the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* asked:

Is dramatism merely metaphorical? Although such prototypically dramatistic usages as "all the world's a stage" are clearly metaphors, the situation looks quite otherwise when approached from another point of view. For instance, a physical scientist's relation to the materials involved in the study of motion differs in quality from his relation to his colleagues.... In this sense, man is defined literally as an animal characterized by his special aptitude for "symbolic action, which is itself a literal term. And from there on, drama is employed, not as a metaphor but as a fixed form that helps us discover what the implications of the terms "act" and "person *really are*." ("Dramatism 11)

Bryan Crable notes that Burke called dramatism literal even earlier, in his 1955 article "Linguistic Approach to Problems of Education, as well as in 1961's *The Rhetoric of Religion* (Crable 326). So, Burke's position had been clear on this matter for many decades, making Brock's claim of a change of heart by Burke suspect.

Burke doesn't even claim originality in his parsing of action into the pentadic elements, which he emphasizes are not positive terms, but rather questions (*Conversations* 3:54). He notes that the pentadic questions have been the subject of scholars concerned with motives for thousands of years, from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to Talcott Parsons' *Structure of Social Action*, and they were "fixed in the medieval questions: *quis* (agent), *quid* (act), *ubi* (scene defined as place), *quibus auxiliis* (agency), *cur* (purpose), *quo modo* (manner, 'attitude'), *quando* (scene defined temporarily)" ("Dramatism" 9).

A curmudgeon might note that "attitude is a Johnny-come-lately to the pentadic party, added in an addendum to a later edition of the *Grammar* (443). If the pentadic questions are so fundamental and universal, how could he leave out this one? He explains that attitude, which answers the "how" question as "in what manner, is implicit in *act*, as a preparation or a substitution for action. That is, it was always there, but it was a subtlety in action that may usefully be teased out or left under the more general term *act*. "Shaking with fear is as much an action as "fearful is an attitude, but the distinction between more overt action and what takes place "inside is useful. Attitudes hide in ways that overt actions cannot, involving mental or emotional "action that might be missed by an onlooker, but which may completely change our interpretation of a given action. (Consider our



interpretation of the smile of Ted Bundy as he interacted with young women, knowing that this “happy attitude is grounded in something psychopathic—a dream of rape and murder.) Attitudes also may serve as a substitution for action (feeling pity for the poor, instead of giving them money), or as a precursor to action—a sort of inchoate act that is only complete when externalized.

Theoretically, we could look for such inchoate forms of the other pentadic terms as well. Can we usefully distinguish an “inchoate scene for example—perhaps on the edge of being a “dangerous scene but not quite there? Or an “inchoate agent—one who might be a hero, but isn’t quite there? Or an “inchoate agency—perhaps a shoe used awkwardly as a hammer, or a scalpel (an instrument for saving life) as a murder weapon? Burke always directed us to the “edges of pentadic terms, especially the spots where two pentadic terms overlap; and so it is, perhaps, with an act that bleeds over into something we recognize as an attitude.

I believe the evidence shows that Burke has not changed his position on the literal description of humans as engaging in action, rather than mere motion. Whether or not humans have free will, humans treat others as if they have purposes, which are structured in acts, agents, agencies, scenes, and perhaps attitudes. Indeed, humans are only recognizably human insofar as they take account of others in this way; they only succeed as a species to the extent that they have facility with the grammar of motives (though perhaps that is our downfall as well). Finally, scholars over thousands of years have recognized these ubiquitous questions about action as central to understanding what humans do. To me this is the evidence for dramatism as literal.

Having emphasized the literal nature of dramatism’s description of the human world, let me rush to add that that literal description constructs an architectonic heuristic that allows one to systematically identify competing lines of argument about motives in a given case. So when someone attempts to disparage President Obama as a liberal spendthrift who is running up huge deficits (as Republicans frequently accuse “tax and spend Democrats of doing), any pedestrian Burke scholar could advise him to counter that agent-focused construction of motives with a scenic one: “The threatening economic downturn requires us to spend money to avoid a deeper recession or depression. But, just because the pentad is an intentional well for competing constructions of motives is no reason to claim that it is paradoxical or non-literal. One might as soon claim that Aristotle’s common *topoi* are

paradoxical because one can find different content in applying them (e.g., different *past facts*).

### **Being Literal**

The final stand for those who want to deny that dramatism is literal is to raise the bar for what is accepted as a literal statement. Burke's disputants in the ECA dialogue pointed to Burke's own claims about the perspectivism in and metaphorical nature of language. Crable comes to Burke's rescue in a philosophical essay that separates two claims from the ECA panel: that dramatism is ontological and that dramatism is literal. Crable argues persuasively that

Burke was making *two separate claims*: (1) dramatism is ontological, and not epistemological, because it begins with language as action, not representation; and (2) this starting-point can claim a privileged (literal) status because, compared to scientism or behaviorism, it offers a more complete approach to the study of motivation. (324)

Key to Crable's argument about dramatism's literalness is a watering down of what it means to say that something is literal, drawing upon Burke's essay on "Rhetoric, Poetics, and Philosophy. This "soft form of literalness suggest that we can't make statements about things or people "in themselves (the ultimate philosophical standard), but we can make statements that interpret situations by comparing them to previously experienced situations, analogically extending our understanding of the earlier to the later. And, such analogical extensions in statements such as "I shall gather some wood to build a fire are certainly distinguishable from explicitly metaphorical statements such as "I'm going to build a fire under that guy, which Burke used to emphasize the distinction (Crable, 332-333).

I don't want to get into a philosophical discussion any deeper than necessary here, but I would like to note the uniqueness of Burke's examples here, because I believe they are particular to his purposes of juxtaposing a metaphorical statement with a non-metaphorical statement and a bit misleading for our purposes. "I shall gather some wood to build a fire is a statement about *intended action*, rather than a statement that describes some objective state of the world. Because it concerns action, we can apply all kinds of different criteria to judging it: Is it a sincere statement (does he actually intend to do it)? Does it state something that is possible (does he have the capacity to gather wood and build a fire; do the laws of physics allow that wood can be used to build a fire)? Does it state something that is likely to be done (do people gather wood and build fires at this place and this time)? Does it state something ethical (is burning carbon fuels the right

thing to do)? Asking whether such a statement is literal is a bit strange, however, unless by “literal one means “possible, “normal, or “sincere. Speech act theory seems better suited to grappling with such a statement. However, for Burke’s purposes of distinguishing between statements about gathering wood for a fire and patently metaphorical statements about “lighting a fire under a guy, it may suffice.

On the other hand, if I make a statement about the world, such as “Humans are mammals, then that can be judged on truth criteria, at least theoretically. (In practice, we don’t generally act like philosophical hair-splitters—if someone asks us to “pass the potatoes, we tend to manage to do that without much trouble, not bothering to try and identify what counts as a potato.) If we know what humans are and what mammals are and what it means to be a mammal, then we should be able to judge the truth of such a statement. If it can be judged on truth criteria, then we can say that the statement is literal. That is not to say that such statements must be true to be literal. I can say, “I was raised a Catholic—a literal statement that can be judged on truth criteria and which, in fact, is false. Literality does not require truthfulness, only that something is capable of a truth judgment.

In addition to being subject to being false, literal statements, even if they are true, function, like any other terministic screen, as selective representations of the world. Therefore, something can be a literal statement and still function rhetorically. Even so scientific a statement as “The shortest distance between two points is a straight line serves rhetorically to make efficiency an important value, to highlight “travel or “movement as something we should scrutinize, and to invoke the scientific ethos through its direct, terse, unadorned style.

Herb Simons apparently believes that “literal and “rhetorical are mutually exclusive categories, for he argues that Burke’s claims about the literalness of dramatism require them to work in a “nonrhetorical way, avoiding embellishments, uncertainties, judgments, and perspectives (Burke et al., 29-30). But, consider Burke’s counter to Darwin: Darwin emphasized the nature of humans as animals who evolved from earlier species, while Burke sought to emphasize the qualitative difference that arises when humans gain the ability to use natural languages. Burke’s concern is not that Darwin’s theory of evolution is untrue (and that statements about it are not literal), but only that it draws attention to human animality at the expense of human symbolicity. Despite the differing emphases Burke and Darwin give to their characterizations of humans, that does not mean one of them must be in error or that one of them is speaking metaphorically.

Now, admittedly, dramatism's *literal statements* about humans and action—that things move and humans act; that we are bodies that learn language; that action is constituted through distinctions reflected in the pentadic questions—are subject to falsity, like any other literal statements. And Brock and Simons could certainly argue that they are false. But they should not argue that they are metaphorical.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, it would have been easier for me to play the philosophical game to reject Brock and Simons' claims, and even Brian Crable's watering-down approach by pointing out the paradox they create for themselves: Is Brock's claim that Burke has switched from believing dramatism is metaphorical to believing it is literal itself a literal claim? Is Simons being metaphorical when he says that literal statements are nonrhetorical? Is Crable's claim that Burke is using a "soft version of literality itself a literal statement? And, overall, isn't the action of these three scholars in trying to persuade others about how to see dramatism itself predicated on an assumption that their readers are agents who act, who have their own purposes, and who can be moved by arguments? Isn't this the sort of "pragmatic acknowledgment that Burke is talking about when he distinguishes the chemist with her chemicals from the chemist with her colleagues?

When Burke says that people act and things move, when he says that there is a difference between the taste of an orange and the words "the taste of an orange, when he says that we participate in a symbolic world of our own making that literally exists (and that literally will vanish when human life is gone), he means that literally. We should understand that as his meaning. And we should sidestep the philosophical language games that problematize that which we must pragmatically recognize if we are to avoid being locked up in some rubber room as one who does not recognize that the social reality created by language is a reality we can talk about literally.

### Notes

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We can add Frank Lentricchia to the group of dissenting dramatists as well.  
See Lentricchia 68-69.

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